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CITATION:

Tijdeman, R.. On the product of the terms of a finite arithmetic progression. 数理解析研究所講究録 1989, 708: 51-62

ISSUE DATE:

1989-12

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/101645>

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## On the product of the terms of a finite arithmetic progression

by

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Let  $a, d$  and  $k$  be positive integers,  $k \geq 3$ . We consider the arithmetic progression  $a, a + d, a + 2d, \dots, a + (k - 1)d$  and in particular the product  $\Delta = a(a + d) \dots (a + (k - 1)d)$ .

There are two circles of problems we shall consider:

- I: What can be said about the greatest prime factor  $P(\Delta)$  of  $\Delta$  and the number of distinct prime divisors  $\omega(\Delta)$  of  $\Delta$ ?
- II: Can  $\Delta$  be an (almost) perfect power? Can each of  $a, a + d, \dots, a + (k - 1)d$  be an  $\ell$ -th power for some  $\ell \geq 2$ ?

This lecture reports on joint work with T.N. Shorey. It can be considered as an updating of my first lecture given in Banff in 1988, [20]. Almost all results have effective proofs, but for this aspect I refer to the original papers. I am grateful to Shorey for his remarks on an earlier draft of the present paper.

I. Without loss of generality we may assume  $\gcd(a, d) = 1$ . A first general result on

I was obtained by Sylvester [19] in 1892. He proved

$$(1) \quad \text{if } a \geq d + k \text{ then } P(\Delta) > k.$$

Suppose  $d = 1$ . Then we consider the product of a block of  $k$  integers. If  $a \geq 1 + k$ , then there is apparently at least one number in the block  $a, a + 1, \dots, a + k - 1$  which is not composed of primes  $\leq k$ . If  $a = 1 + k$ , this is Bertrand's Postulate. If  $a < 1 + k$ , the last term of the block is less than  $2k$ . Then the question becomes whether  $k + 1, \dots, a + k - 1$  contains a prime. This is the classical problem on gaps between consecutive primes. The theorem of Hoheisel, Ingham as improved by many others says that if  $a > k^{23/42}$  and  $k$  is sufficiently large then there is a prime. (The exponent  $23/42$  has been slightly improved, see [7]). Probably  $a > (1 + \epsilon)(\log k)^2$  for large  $k$  is sufficient according to a hypothesis of Cramér, but it will be extremely hard to prove this.

Suppose  $d > 1$ . Then (1) was slightly improved by Langevin in 1977 as follows.

$$(2) \quad \text{If } a > k, \text{ then } P(\Delta) > k.$$

Shorey and I showed that in fact 2, 9, 16 is the only exception:

**Theorem 1.** ([14]). *Let  $d > 1, k > 2, \gcd(a, d) = 1, (a, d, k) \neq (2, 7, 3)$ . Then  $P(\Delta) > k$ .*

The proof rests on a sharp upper bound for  $\pi(x)$  due to Rosser and Schoenfeld and is further computational.

If  $a$  becomes large, then much better lower bounds are possible. Shorey and I improved upon some estimate of Langevin [5].

**Theorem 2.** ((a) and (c) in [15], (b) unpublished). Let  $\chi = a + (k-1)d$ ,  $\chi_0 = \max(\chi/k, 3)$ ,  $\epsilon > 0$ .

- (a)  $P(\Delta) \gg k \log \log \chi_0 \quad (\geq k \log \log d).$
- (b) if  $\chi > k(\log k)^\epsilon$  then  $P(\Delta) \gg_\epsilon k \log \log a.$
- (c) if  $\chi > k^{1+\epsilon}$  then  $P(\Delta) \gg_\epsilon k \log \log \chi.$

The proof is based on Baker's method, in particular a result on the Thue equation by Györy [4]. Note that some conditions in (b) and (c) are necessary. In (b) we can take  $a = [k/2], d = 1$  and it follows that  $P(\Delta) \leq a + (k-1)d < 3k/2 = o(k \log \log a)$ . In (c) we can take  $a = 1, d = [(\log \log \chi)^{1/2}]$  and it follows that  $P(\Delta) \leq a + (k-1)d < k(\log \log \chi)^{1/2} = o(k \log \log \chi)$ .

Very recently we studied  $\omega(\Delta)$ . If  $a = d = 1$ , then  $\omega(\Delta) = \omega(k!) = \pi(k)$ . There are more examples with  $\omega(\Delta) = \pi(k)$ , for example 1, 625, 1249, and 1, 3, 5, 7, 9.

**Theorem 3.** [16]

$$\omega(\Delta) \geq \pi(k).$$

The proof is similar to that of Theorem 1. Here only limited improvement is possible

if  $a$  becomes large. We cannot exclude that there are  $k - 1$  primes  $p_1, \dots, p_{k-1}$  in such a way that  $1, p_1, \dots, p_{k-1}$  are in arithmetic progression, so that we cannot prove anything better than  $\omega(\Delta) \geq k - 1$ .

**Theorem 4.** (a) *For any positive integer  $t > 1$  we have*

$$\text{if } \chi \geq k^{\frac{k}{t-1}+1} \quad \text{then } \omega(\Delta) > k - t.$$

(b) *there are infinitely many instances with  $\chi \geq k^{2.7}$  and  $\omega(\Delta) < ck$  with  $c < 1$ .*

The proof of (a) is elementary. For (b) we use estimates for the Dickman function  $\psi(x, y)$ . If we take  $t = .6k$  in (a), then we find that  $\omega(\Delta) > .4k$  if  $\chi \geq k^{2.7}$  and (b) shows that  $ck$  for some  $c$  with  $0 < c < 1$  is the actual order of magnitude.

II. How many  $\ell$ th powers can be in arithmetic progression? If  $\ell = 2$ , then there are infinitely many triples of squares in arithmetic progression, but Fermat proved that there are no four squares in arithmetic progression. Dénes [1] proved in 1952 that there are no three  $\ell$ -th powers in arithmetic progression for  $3 \leq \ell \leq 30$  and for 60 other prime values of  $\ell$  and he conjectured that this is true for all  $\ell$ . He used Kummer theory and his method is not applicable for irregular primes. The celebrated result of Faltings [3] implies that for any  $\ell \geq 5$  there are only finitely many triples of coprime  $\ell$ -th powers in arithmetic progression, but his result does not provide any bound for  $k$  independent of  $\ell$ . In the sequel we assume  $\gcd(a, d) = 1, k \geq 3$  and  $\ell \geq 2$ . Let  $d_1$  be the maximal divisor of  $d$  composed of prime factors  $\equiv 1 \pmod{\ell}$ .

**Theorem 5.** ( (a), (c) and (d) from [12], (b) from [13] ).

Suppose  $a, a + d, \dots, a + (k - 1)d$  are all  $\ell$ -th powers. Then

(a) if  $d$  is odd, then  $k = 3$ ,

(b)  $k < (1 + \epsilon)2^{\omega(d)}$  for  $k \geq k_0(\epsilon)$ ,

(c)  $k \ll \omega(d) \log \omega(d)$ ,

(d)  $k \ll \sqrt{\log d}$ .

A much weaker condition is that not each of the numbers is an  $\ell$ -th power, but that the product of the numbers is an  $\ell$ -th power. If  $d = 1$  we find that

$$(3) \quad a(a + 1)(a + 2) \dots (a + k - 1) = y^\ell \quad (\ell > 1).$$

It was proved by Erdős and Selfridge [2] in 1975, 36 years after Erdős started this research, that (3) has no solution in positive integers  $a, k > 2, y, \ell > 1$ . Later Erdős conjectured that if

$$(4) \quad a(a + d)(a + 2d) \dots (a + (k - 1)d) = y^\ell$$

then  $k$  is bounded by an absolute constant. Still later he conjectured  $k \leq 3$ . Some special cases are in the literature. Euler proved that the product of four numbers in arithmetic progression cannot be a square. Of course, this implies Fermat's result that there are no four squares in arithmetic progression. Obláth [8] proved the result for the product of five numbers in arithmetic progression. He [9] also proved that

the product of three numbers in arithmetic progression cannot be a third, fourth or fifth power. Marszalek [6] was the first to deal with the general problem. He proved that  $k$  is bounded by a number depending only on  $d$ . He gave rather refined estimates, but a rough simplification of his result gives:

$$\begin{aligned} k &\leq \exp(2d^{3/2}) & \text{if } \ell = 2, \\ k &\leq \exp(2d^{7/3}) & \text{if } \ell = 3, \\ k &\leq Cd^{5/2} & \text{if } \ell = 4, \\ k &\leq Cd & \text{if } \ell \geq 5, \text{ where } C = 3 \cdot 10^4. \end{aligned}$$

Shorey [10] proved that  $k$  is bounded by a number depending on  $P(d)$ , the greatest prime factor of  $d$ , provided that  $\ell > 2$ . Shorey [10] further proved that  $d_1 > 1$  if  $m > k$  and  $k$  large.

Shorey and I have obtained many results on equation (4). Actually we proved these results under the following weaker assumption.

$$(5) \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Let } a, d, k, b, y, \ell \text{ be positive integers such that } \gcd(a, d) = 1, \\ k > 2, \ell > 1, P(b) \leq k, P(y) > k \text{ and} \\ a(a+d) \dots (a+(k-1)d) = by^\ell. \end{array} \right.$$

In the sequel we assume that (5) holds.

**Theorem 6.**  $\log k << \frac{\log d_1}{\log \log d_1}.$

**Proof.** For  $\ell \geq 7$ , see [18]. For  $\ell \leq 5$  see [17], formula (2.14).

Observe that this is a considerable improvement of Marszalek's result. We see that

$k/d \rightarrow 0$  as  $d \rightarrow \infty$  and even  $\log k / \log d \rightarrow 0$  as  $d \rightarrow \infty$ .

**Theorem 7.** [17]  $k << d_1^{1/(\ell-2)}.$

This implies Shorey's estimate  $d_1 > 1$  for  $\ell > 2$  and  $k$  large.

**Theorem 8.** [17] *Let  $k$  be a positive integer and  $\ell \geq 2$ . Then*

$$\frac{k}{\log k} \ll \ell^{\omega(d)} \quad (\text{even } \ll \ell^{\omega(d_1)} \text{ for } \ell \geq 7).$$

Thus  $k$  is bounded by a number depending only on  $\ell$  and  $\omega(d)$ . Actually we tried to prove that  $k$  is bounded by a number depending only on  $\omega(d)$ , but we did not succeed.

Suppose  $\ell > 2$  and  $P(d)$  is bounded. Then  $k$  is bounded or every prime factor of  $d_1$  is bounded by Theorem 7. However, by definition every prime factor of  $d_1$  is larger than  $\ell$ . So we obtain that  $\omega(d)$  and  $\ell$  are bounded, hence, by Theorem 8,  $k$  is bounded. Thus Theorems 7 and 8 generalize the results of Shorey mentioned above.

Theorems 7 and 8 imply a slightly weaker inequality than Theorem 6 gives. It is well known that  $\omega(n) \ll \log n / \log \log n$  for all  $n > e$ . Suppose  $\ell \geq 7$ . If  $\ell \leq \log \log k / \log \log \log k$  then Theorem 8 implies

$$\log k \ll \frac{\log d}{\log \log d_1} \cdot \log \log \log k$$

and if  $\ell > \log \log k / \log \log \log k$  then Theorem 7 implies

$$\log k \ll \frac{\log d_1}{\ell} < \log d_1 \frac{\log \log \log k}{\log \log k}.$$

Theorems 7 and 8 have proofs based on multiple application of the box principle.

For  $\ell = 2$  the proof is elementary, but complicated. For  $\ell \geq 3$  the proof is completely



different. For  $\ell \geq 7$  we obtain the best results via elementary arguments, but for  $\ell = 3$  and 5 we reach the best estimates when we use Brun's sieve and some result of Evertse on the number of solutions of the equation  $ax^\ell - by^\ell = c$ , proved by using hypergeometric functions. I want to stress that many lemmas and arguments are due to Erdős.

We have proved that  $P(d)$ , and even  $P(d_1)$ , tends to  $\infty$  when  $k \rightarrow \infty$ . In fact we can prove

**Theorem 9.** [18]

$$P(d_1) \gg \ell \log k \log \log k \quad \text{for } \ell \geq 7,$$

$$P(d) \gg \ell \log k \log \log k \quad \text{for } \ell \in \{2, 3, 5\}.$$

In [18] we give also lower bounds for the smallest prime factor and the greatest square free divisor of  $d_1$ .

Up to now I have restricted myself to dependence on  $d, d_1, k$  and  $\ell$ . Of course,  $a$  can also been taken into account.

**Theorem 10** [17].

(a) *There is an absolute constant  $\ell_0$  such that for  $\ell \geq \ell_0$  we have*

$$k \ll_a 1.$$

(b)

$$k \ll_{a, \omega(d)} 1.$$

For (a) see Shorey [11]. Further (b) follows from the combination of (a) and Theorem

8.

The last theorem concerns upper bounds for the largest term in the arithmetic progression.

**Theorem 11.** [17]. *There is an absolute constant  $k_0$  such that  $k \geq k_0$  implies*

$$a + (k - 1)d \leq 17d^2 k (\log k)^4 \quad \text{if } \ell = 2$$

and

$$a + (k - 1)d << k \left(\frac{d}{\ell}\right)^{\ell/(\ell-2)} \quad \text{if } \ell > 2.$$

Finally I want to state a conjecture for the general situation in the line of the conjectures of Dénes and Erdős stated above.

Conjecture. If (5) holds, then  $k + \ell \leq 6$ .

If  $k + \ell \leq 6$ , then  $(k, \ell) = (3, 3)$  or  $(4, 2)$ . It is shown in [20] that in these cases there are infinitely many solutions. As a more moderate target I challenge the reader to prove that  $k$  is bounded by a function of only  $\omega(d)$  if (5) is satisfied.

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